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ABSTRACT

A good way "to get at gender" is to ask students to write about their literacy because literacy is a good catalyst for discussion and analysis regarding the complexities of gender. A number of recent articles connect composition studies with issues of gender, including those by Elizabeth Flynn, Geoff Sirc, Linda Peterson, Don Kraemer Jr., and Lester Faigley. Further, articles by Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, Mary Soliday, Linda Brodkey, and Deborah Brandt stress the usefulness of literacy narratives. Indeed Brandt's article did much to change one instructor's approach to teaching literacy narratives. Working with other instructors, he has recently changed the literacy assignment, away from the "narrative" or the "literary" and toward a student accounting of his or her literacy. In his class, students exchange their accounts of literacy with one another and in small groups of three to four, they do collaborative, quasi-ethnographic studies of them. They write impressions and share those impressions; they sift and sort different aesthetic and critical scrims, usually of their own devising, and invariably groups will return to gender as one of those scrims. (Contains 20 references.) (TB)

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ED 381 799

Gender Tracing and Literacy Narratives

Michael Kuhne, University of Minnesota

Driving back to St. Paul from Nashville and the 1994 CCCConference, I spent most of my non-driving time reading Victor Villanueva's Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color. It was not the first academic/intellectual memoir I had read, but it was the most impressive from a group of texts that includes Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary, Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera, James Phelan's Beyond the Tenure Track, Keith Gilyard's Voices of the Self, Richard Rodriguez's Hunger of Desire,[1] and Toni McNaron's I Dwell in Possibility. What has remained in the afterglow of reading Villanueva's book are his depictions of his actual work conditions set against and alongside the stereotypical notions of "masculine" work, his portrayal of intellectual class issues, and his narrative critique of the literacy myth. In short, I find it attractive because Villanueva is able to write about the multiple selves that constitute who Villanueva is. He is able to talk about gender in a way that is rich, complex, aware; in other words, gender is a very important factor in the multiple selves, but it is always an important factor in conjunction with other factors (class, race, religion, geography, sexual preference, . . .). When I ask students to write their own literacy accounts, those that seem most critical and aware are able to do this juggling of overlapping, Venn-diagram like narrative spheres. Like Villanueva, those successful literacy accounts are doing

[1] Since March 1994, I have read Rodriguez's Days of Obligation, and its impact on me has been as great (if not greater) than Villanueva's Bootstraps. In addition to the content I found attractive in Villanueva's text (work, class, literacy), Rodriquez's Days of Obligation also adds to the mix at least two topics: sexual preference and another topic that currently captures my fascination--late 20th century Catholicism. Though this particular presentation focuses on gender issues in autobiographical essays--more accurately, literacy accounts--and Catholicism seems tangential to gender, I think it is actually a very rich site for gender exploration. One might begin with Mary Daly's literacy/religious account in The Church and the Second Sex or her postchristian account Beyond God the Father

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what my colleague Kathleen Sheerin Devore calls "writing coherently about incoherence."

My description of Villanueva's book betrays my "ideal text" and the ways that I read, preferring complex, self-aware, polyphonic texts. It is probably unrealistic to ask that first-year students be able to do this type of analytical, self-reflexive writing, perhaps especially in regard to gender issues. But, it seems perfectly reasonable to ask students to begin (or continue) thinking about gender issues in the hope that this will lay the groundwork for their own "(re)constructions."

This presentation looks at some of the gender studies work that has been done in composition studies over the last seven years, beginning with Elizabeth Flynn's important article "Composing as a Woman" because it marks, in many respects, a call for gender studies in composition studies. It continues by looking at three other articles that draw, in one way or another, from Flynn's article, plus an important essay by Lester Faigley. The point of this review is to problematize the nature of gender studies within composition studies. I'll then move the discussion into the classroom and talk about a popular writing activity called literacy narratives. I'll conclude by asking those in attendance about pedagogical practices that problematize gender issues for students in productive and meaningful ways.

Flynn's "Composing as a Women" was published in CCC in 1988. It is probably most important for its declaration that "the field of feminist studies and composition studies have not engaged each other in a serious or systematic way" (114). This statement served as a call for further research, and the other articles I'll discuss are, in one way or another, in dialogue with Flynn's essay. Flynn weaves the work of social and psychological development theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and the Women's Ways of Knowing research team (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule) into her analysis of student writing, an analysis which I'll reduce to Flynn's observation that "the narratives of the female students are stories of

interaction, of connection, or frustrated connection" while "the narratives of the male students are stories of achievement, of separation, or of frustrated achievement" (117). Although she does not claim that the four narratives she analyzes are "neat illustrations of the feminist positions" because of the contradictory and complex nature of the narratives (121), Flynn does suggest that "a recognition that women are different in important ways from men is a necessary first step in a recognition that power has been distributed inequitably throughout history and in every culture" (124). This question of difference is one that Geoff Sirc takes up in a 1989 article in Freshmen English News.

While Flynn begins her article with a quote from Adrienne Rich ("It is not easy to think like a woman in a man's world, ..."), Sirc begins with a quote from Luce Irigaray ("Woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as men's desire."), and the choice of beginnings seems important. Although Rich and Irigaray, at least in this instance, seem to be saying the same thing--that women think and use language differently then men--Rich and Irigaray signify two related, but very different strands of feminist thinking. Rich is addressing gender issues from the liberal perspective of "women-in-a-man's world", whereas Irigaray's radical perspective focuses on difference, and in many respects, a privileging of women's language. This analysis fits almost-too-nicely with categories that Flynn herself establishes in a recent College English article wherein she outlines four strands of feminism: liberal, radical, cultural, and postmodern (see appendix). Although neither Flynn nor Sirc can be categorized so neatly, their opening rhetorical gestures are important because they exhibit to a certain degree the epistemologies of each researcher. Flynn seeks a recognition of an "equitable" composing process for women; Sirc's research begs a critique of writing assignments that reproduce dominant gender roles, to (returning to the Irigaray quote) understand the pedagogical "desire" of our writing assignments.

Sirc sets out to see what his "first-year writing students were writing about, their occupational ideologies," as those ideologies were displayed in narratives.[2] He admits that he is "forc[ing] a reading" of the students' writing as he "listen[s] for the echoes of gender," but he argues that "the reading is worth forcing, as the textual results of gender show its mechanisms to be a primary, systematic determinant in the student writing" (5b). One result of the reading is Sirc's taxonomy of seven topical features, sub-divided further into male and female features (see appendix). Sirc remarks that the "conclusions I draw from my small study are disheartening indeed" (9a), particularly in regard to the differences reflected in the writer's sense of agency and in the writer's ability to recognize others.[3] He asserts that "it is not a question of endorsing one gender's writing formation over another; rather it is the need to address the predictable, determined pattern that, as regards cultural power, seems biased against women" and that "it seems obvious that traditional topics such as the personal narrative are not automatically going to bring about the personal growth essential to accompany growth as writers"--in fact, Sirc fears that "the incident papers [of this study] . . . may have allowed [the students] . . . to feel more comfortable and settled with [their gender roles]"(9b). Sirc's point is relatively straightforward: "there is always already a built-in gender bias in any writing sample . . . [and] any occasion for the actual production of written discourse is going to reflect the way that the writer (as well as the text) has been inscribed into the forms of gender's discourse" (4a). Linda Peterson addresses similar concerns from a different perspective in "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay."

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[2] Sirc's classroom setting included 20 women and 21 men who "were white, middle class eighteen- and nineteen-year olds who, for their essay assignment, were asked to 'recreate for me in words a single incident in which you were involved or which you witnessed'"(5a).

[3] This is a loose translation, since Sirc is tracing patterns where the student writers are mentioning the opposite sex. I am uncomfortable with a certain hetero-centric assumption embedded in that analysis, but I believe my own translation retains the intent of Sirc's analysis.

Peterson's article begins by asking "does the autobiographical essay privilege the experiences or skills of one gender over the other? . . . can our formulation of assignments and classroom pedagogy affect the success of some students we ask to compose this form of writing?" (171). Peterson brings two perspectives to the questions: composition studies and literary history, and in particular her reading of 19th century women's autobiographical writings. Though Peterson does not cite Sirc's article, her analysis of topical features is similar to his (female topics tend to be "relational"; male topics tend to focus on "the self alone"). The result of Peterson's analysis are two sets of guidelines: one pedagogical, the other "advice for producing a successful autobiographical essay" (177). (See appendix.) Beyond the guidelines, however, Peterson is dealing with the issues involved in evaluation. She notes that "the best writers either ignore gender boundaries or call them into question" (176), but she also recognizes that the sense of gender aesthetics a writing teacher brings to any piece of student autobiographical writing needs to be problematized. She asks that "we re-examine our assumptions about 'good' writing" (181). Re-examining assumptions about good writing is the focus of Lester Faigley's article "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," and Faigley's work is absolutely critical to an understanding about the ways in which gender is constituted within autobiographical essays, but I am leaping ahead of myself. Before I discuss Faigley, I want to bring to a close the discussion about gender and the autobiographical essay by discussing Don Kraemer's article "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay: A Critical Extension of the Research."

Kraemer's article takes to task much of what Flynn, Sirc, and Peterson have said, because Kraemer argues that "what we want to know has affected how we read gender narratives, that we have hedged on reversing the terms of this thesis, and that reversing the terms would make a difference in our reading practices" (324) Kraemer goes on to assert that "typically, gender studies do not attend to the

contradictions and inconsistencies which they acknowledge characterize these gender narratives just as much as does a clear gender gap" (327) The problem, therefore, is that "while gender studies ask how gender affects the way we use language, they do not ask how the way we use language affects gender" (327). Kraemer argues that "gender is not one language but many, any one of which implies a network of social relations that guides how we act with and upon others for as long as the language of that network is spoken" and he goes on to suggest that we "read the languages of gender with attention to the range of social relations they imply and to the relative continuity and discontinuity within that range" (328).[4] Kraemer concludes by asserting that "writing is an ongoing, intensely local production of cultural material, including (and not escaping) gender, which yields new, specific scripts for generalizing" (337). In many respects, Kraemer's analysis resonates with Faigley's analysis in "Judging Writing, Judging Selves."

For the purposes of this presentation, Faigley's article serves as an interesting point of departure because of the manner in which he takes up gender and autobiographical writings as (using Kraemer's words) the "local production of

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[4] In defense of the other articles, Flynn, Sirc, and Peterson all seem to recognize the limits of their assertions. Flynn writes that she is "hardly claiming that the four narratives are neat illustrations . . . [since] the narratives themselves are often characterized by inconsistency and contradiction as by a univocality of theme and tone" (121). Sirc concludes his essay by asking a series of important questions which precede and anticipate Kraemer's criticism when he asks, "what other variables operate as systematically as gender? For a more comprehensive delineation of our students' writing formations . . . can only give us a more refined, encompassing view of the real social constraints responsible for our students' written production" (10b). And, finally, Peterson recognizes the permutative nature of gender roles what she notes that successful students "figure out what political, social, and sexual positions coincide with [writing instructors' positions] and reproduce them--whether consciously or unconsciously, sincerely or cynically"--in other words, the students' representations of gender are always embedded in the power relations of the rhetorical writing setting (177). It also seems important to note the timing of the research. In other words, early studies tend to start with descriptions (and I recognize the cultural production inherent in the description process . . .), and later research problematizes the descriptions. In short, I think Kraemer essentializes the earlier articles and does not recognize how his own reading of the research is embedded in the very "network of social relations" he describes.

cultural material, including (and not escaping) gender, which yields new, specific scripts for generalizing." Like Peterson, Faigley uses the anthology What Makes Writing Good as a springboard for analysis.[5] However, at the point where Peterson ends her article calling for a "re-examin[ation of] our assumptions about 'good' writing," Faigley begins with that question as he examines the aesthetics and identity politics inherent in the evaluation process. In other words, Faigley raises issues about *how* we read, what scrims of aesthetic cloth are always in place between the students' writings and the teachers' readings. He argues that, "each judgment of value is made from some notion of value, usually a notion that is widely shared within a culture" (395). What Faigley notices in the Coles and Vopat anthology "is an assumption that individuals possess an identifiable 'true' self and that the true self can be expressed in discourse" (405). In the end, Faigley concludes that "the freedom students are given in some classes to choose and adapt autobiographical assignments hides the fact that these same students will be judged by the teachers' unstated cultural definitions of self" (410), because "the self in student autobiographies . . . is not one that emerges like a butterfly from a chrysalis . . . but one that is discursively produced and discursively bounded" (411).

So, where are we left, those of us who want to use "personal" writing,[6] but who wish to do so in a productive (rather than reproductive) manner? I do not pretend to have *the* answer to that question, but I suggest that students might most fruitfully begin an examination of gender issues[7] as they are, to use Faigley's words,

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[5] What Makes Writing Good. Ed. William E. Coles and James Vopat. Lexington: Heath, 1985.

[6] "Personal" hereafter ironized because of its ambiguous meaning, given the previous analysis.

[7] And, I think it is almost impossible to write or discuss "gender issues" within the closed-ness of this text, once again given the preceding argument. In other words, I am faced with the difficult problem of writing about "gender+" or "genderX" or "gender†"--or some orthographic convention in a way which would confound, disturb, or disrupt the "common sense" meaning of the word.

"discursively produced and discursively bounded," or, in other words, by writing about their literacy.

In short, I am suggesting that students write about their literacy to see how gender (and other influences) are written. But what is the nature of this writing task? The literacy assignment has a wide variety of names, including literacy narratives, literacy autobiographies, and literacy histories, none of which satisfy my pedagogical sensibilities because, as Faigley et al have shown us, the personal narrative, autobiography, or history is always judged by "the teachers' unstated cultural definitions of self." I do not mean to suggest that students' literacy narratives "go beyond" or "avoid" the cultural definitions of self; rather, that students' writing about their literacy, provided it is directed by the instructor in a thoughtful manner, can supply students and instructors with a site for examining the discursivity of gender. At this point, it seems useful to trace how literacy narratives have come to be discussed in some of the composition literature and to return to the specific meaning I propose.

Literacy narratives have proven popular; a quick read of the 1995 CCCConvention Program shows the term "literacy narrative" arising time and time again. But I am left to wonder what people mean when they invoke the phrase. In Eldred and Mortenson's article entitled "Reading Literacy Narratives," they define literacy narratives as "those stories, like Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy" (513). Their definition is in keeping with their insistence that "literacy study . . . needs to move . . . into the study of literary texts" (512). And so, for them, the literacy narrative is an artifact embedded in a *literary* work.

I have no doubt that this type of criticism is productive. The September 1994 College English, for instance, includes two important articles that are in keeping with Eldred and Mortenson's position. Mary Soliday's "Translating Self and

Difference through Literacy Narratives" is an important contribution to this type of work because she links the reading of (literary) literacy narratives to basic writing pedagogy. Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias" is an account of her literacy past, written in a narrative form that I find aesthetically pleasing--in other words, Brodkey portrays her literacy in a literary manner. Is this a condemnation of Brodkey's work? By no means. In fact, some students have found it helpful, since it models excellent self-interrogation. And yet, I am concerned with the way in which this type of criticism and production can conflate literacy with the literary, and, in so doing, value literacy narratives not because they speak to the multiple selves discursively bounded and produced, but because of their literary presentation. Eldred and Mortenson do not necessarily propose this, since in their conclusion they invoke Bahktin and the "literacy narratives function[ing] then as part of the whole polyphonic texts" (531), and this suggests that they recognize the multiple voices at play in any given literacy narrative. Still, I argue that reading literacy narratives in this manner has the potential for eliding literacy, and, in its place, focusing instead on the literary. I raise this concern because, when I first asked students to write about their literacy, I found myself encouraging them to write literary representations of their literacy. I wanted them, in other words, to represent their 'true' literacy in a coherent narrative.. But literacy, like gender, is not necessarily coherent. The narrative genre, with its literary overtones, forces a coherence.

The most interesting work I have read in regard to literacy narratives comes from Deborah Brandt, the pereson who introduced me through her assignment to the study of literacy (see appendix). Her recent articles in CCC "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading" explores the complexities of the writing-reading relationships through a series of interviews with people in and about Dane County, Wisconsin. The focus of the interviews is to ask "what people could remember

about learning to read and write across their lifetimes, particularly the occasions, people, materials, and motivations involved in the processes" (461). She notes that she "was struck by pronounced differences between the ways people remembered early reading and early writing," and the remainder of the article attempts to examine and sort through the differences. She concludes by suggesting that, "If we are going to understand better what literacy instruction represents to students in the future and how it sometimes, inexplicably, can go awry, it is especially important to know about the settings in which knowledge of reading and writing have come to them and the significance implied in those settings. We must understand better what is compelling literacy as it is lived" (477).

This article and my history with a literacy narrative assignment has led me to think differently about students and their writing about their literacy. When I first asked students to write their literacy narratives, revision (at *my* urging) became a question of re-ordering their literacies into neatly organized histories. Portrayals of gender and other variables tended toward flat, two-dimensional representations. More recently, I have been working with a group of instructors to revise the literacy assignment, away from a narrative and twoard a student accounting of their literacy.

The accounts catalog literacy meanings. The students then exchange their accounts with one another and in small groups of 3-4 people, will do collaborative, quasi-ethnographic studies of the class's literacy accounts. They look for patterns and for fissures; they write about their impressions and share those impressions with their small groups and with the rest of the class; they sift and sort different aesthetic and critical scrims, usually of their own devise, and invariably groups will return to gender as one of those scrims. And then, they write an analysis of the accounts, some collaboratively written, some individually written, but in either case, the writing often yields more complicated, multi-dimensional portrayals of gender and other

variables. It seems to produce more aware and analytical writing, and the students' evaluations indicate their own enthusiasm for the process.

So my argument in a nutshell is that a good way "to get at gender" is to ask students to write about their literacy. But in doing so, I am concerned that I have done little to the study of gender issues other than de-emphasize or bury it within the context of a long-term assignment. I am also hesitant to portray the literacy account as THE writing assignment of the postmodern era.

That said, I do want to suggest that students writing about literacy is a catalyst for a discussion and analysis regarding the complexities of gender as students and instructors attempt to, in Brandt's words, "understand better what is compelling literacy as it is lived."

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Gender Tracing and Literacy Narratives, Michael Kuhne
Appendix

Working Definitions of Selected Feminisms
From Elizabeth A. Flynn's "Review: Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition." CE 57 (February 1995): 201-212.

Liberal feminism "arises out of the Enlightenment emphasis on individual rights and focuses on the need to achieve equity between women and men, especially in the workplace . . . . The similarities rather than the differences between men and women are therefore foregrounded" (202).

Radical feminism "emphasizes that patriarchal institutions have been dominant throughout history, resulting in the subordination of women and the devaluation of women's work and women's perceptions" (202).

Cultural feminism "developed out of radical feminism, but emphasizes women's different perspectives, often assigning them considerably more authority than those of men, and calls for the creation of women's communities" (202).

Postmodern feminism "differs from cultural feminism in that it problematizes the categories 'male' and 'female' and rejects constructions of gender that depend on a binary opposition. Gender is seen as inextricably linked to other constructions such as race, class, and ethnicity and to social contexts that destabilize identity, including gender identity. Emphasis is placed on difference within the category 'woman,' hence differences in sexual orientation, race, and social class are foregrounded, and generalizations that attempt to transcend the specificities of time and place are questioned" (203).

Narrative Topic Features
From Geoff Sirc's "Gender and 'Writing Formations' in First-Year Narratives" Freshmen English News 18 (Fall 1989):4-11.

	Male	**Female**
1. Authorial Stance	exclusive, exaggerated	realistic agency and/or reportage
2. Nature of Incident	epic	banal and/or anticlimactic
3. Tone	apocalyptic	care/nurturing
4. Major Frame	quest or mission	the anecdote
5. Linguistic Code	pulp	non-pulp/some stereotypical women's language
6. Locus	control (including a proclivity for facts)	confusion (detail rather than fact)
7. Recognition of Opposite Sex	no mention	frequent

Some Guidelines for Autobiographical Writing
From Linda Peterson's "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay"
CCC 42 (May 1991): 170-183.

Pedagogical Guidelines

1. The formulation of personal writing assignments should not unwittingly privilege one mode of self-understanding over another.
2 The readings suggested as models for the assignment should include examples by and about both masculine and feminine subjects.
3. Evaluation of personal essays should not privilege certain gender-specific modes of self-representation, nor penalize others. (174-5)

"Some advice for producing a successful autobiographical essay"

1. If the event or topic seems gender-specific, explore--perhaps even challenge--the assumptions about men's and women's experience that underlie it.
2. If (1) seems untenable, look for the universal in the experience.
3. For insight and originality, try 'cross-dressing'--that is, use the writerly strategy of viewing experience through the eyes of someone of the opposite sex or from a different racial or ethnic background. (174-8)

Literacy Accounts--Assignment Definition

[This assignment was created by Deborah Brandt. She used it as part of her activities as visiting professor during the Composition and Literacy Seminar at the University of Minnesota (Spring 1992).]

The aim of this assignment is to give an account (from birth to the present) of significant factors and events contributing to your literacy development. While a chronological narrative would be normal, other approaches are certainly allowable. We will share these autobiographies as a way of starting our investigations of literacy, drawing generalities and contrasts about how literacy is defined, how it is transmitted, and how individuals develop as readers and writers. Because we all have to read all of the autobiographies, they shouldn't exceed ten pages or so. (These autobiographies will not be graded. The aim is to recoup social history more than it is to write a literary work of art.)

As you investigate and reflect, please consider the following factors:

- the education and literacy levels of current and preceding generations of your family (go back as far as you can in your family history to consider schooling and occupations of parents, grandparents, etc., in order to establish how literacy was/is/wasn't/isn't part of the economic life of your clan). Please include the year and place of your birth.
- the role(s) of language generally (including talk) in your family and immediate social group. What kinds of talk typically took place in your household among adults, between parents and children, and children and children? What language patterns were typical of your extended family? neighborhood? other social groups?
- the role of written language in your immediate family's social, economic, religious, political, and cultural practices (how did reading and writing mediate your relationships with parents, siblings, and other family members at various stages of your life? How did reading and writing mediate your family's relationships with other groups/institutions?
- the role of written language in play and friendships (how did reading and writing figure in your peer group relationships at various stages of your life)?
- school-based reading and writing -- self-sponsored reading and writing
- role of libraries, bookstores, technologies (television, radio, computer, etc.)
- significant people who influenced your reading and writing
- significant memories of successes and failures
- the role of reading and writing in your developing identity
- relationship of your "literacy style" to other interpretive styles (ways you might interpret events, people, film, art, etc.)
- consider whether and how your history as a writer and/or reader influences how you see or experience the world generally
- other factors
- conclusions or insights that can be drawn from this account about reading and writing development -- the meaning/nature of literacy?